

KANSAS

Kansas State Historical Society
Cultural Resources Division

KATHLEEN SEBELIUS, GOVERNOR

CERTIFICATION OF STATE REGISTER LISTING

The Register of Historic Kansas Places includes all Kansas properties nominated to the National Register as well as lower threshold properties which are listed on the state register only.

Property Name: Junction City Opera House

Address: 135 W. 7th Street, Junction City, KS 66441

Legal:

County: Geary

Owner: City of Junction City

Address: 700 N. Jefferson, Junction City, KS 66441

National Register eligible _____

State Register eligible X

This property was approved by the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review for the Register of Historic Kansas Places on November 8, 2003.

I hereby certify that this property is listed on the Register of Historic Kansas Places.

Richard D. Rankin 11-17-03
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Date

9/95

Register of Historic Places

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The Junction City Opera House (c. 1898) is located on the southeast corner of Jefferson Street and 7th Street in Junction City, Geary County, Kansas (population 18,886). The building measures 145 ft north to south and 67 ft east to west. The north elevation, facing 7th Street, is currently the main entrance into the building and originally was the main entrance to the front portion of the building, which consisted of the city hall, fire department, police department and jail and is comprised of a native Geary County limestone from the foundation, including a basement, up to approximately one foot above the current sidewalk.

A red brick Romanesque style facade was placed above the limestone and continues up to the asphalt shingle hip roof with dormers. Continuing up the north elevation above the roof is a four-faced clock tower, which remains functional today, the top portion fashioned with native limestone. Also protruding above the roof, approximately 20 feet south of the clock tower along the ridge, is a bell and bell assembly, which remains functional today, capped with a hipped asphalt shingle roof, originally used as the City Fire Alarm.

The west elevation, facing Jefferson Street, originally was the main entrance into the rear portion of the building, which was the Opera House auditorium. Today, the Opera House entrance, which was under a porte-cochere which served attendants that arrived by carriage, is blocked in with native limestone. The northern third of the west elevation, which is the only remaining portion of the original building constructed in 1881 that suffered a major fire in 1898, is comprised of red brick and the back two-thirds was rebuilt with native limestone. The east elevation is identical to the west elevation with the exception of the porte-cochere and main entrance. The south elevation, which is the back of the building, abuts the alley which runs east and west between 6th and 7th streets. The height of the building to the top of the clock tower is approximately 75 ft.

The Junction City Opera House sets in the central business district, which is full of buildings built around the turn of the century, many being built with native Geary County Limestone, the same limestone used in the construction of the Kansas State Capital Building located in Topeka, Kansas. Over the years, many of these limestone buildings were faced with aluminum siding and awnings, typical exterior decor employed in the 1960s and 70s. However, in 1999, the City of Junction City, through a Community Development Block Grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce and Housing and with the cooperation and financial support of many of the property owners within the Central Business District, removed the aluminum siding and awnings and worked to restore, to a large extent, the original look and feel of the district from the early 1900s.

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Noteworthy buildings among those found in the Junction City Central Business District are the Bartell Hotel and the Geary County Courthouse.

The opening ceremonies for the Romanesque style Junction City Opera House, designed by George Wells, an architect from Kansas City, were held on January 5, 1882. The facades of all four elevations of the original building was the red brick that now remains on the front one-third of the building. The windows in the front portion of the building gave evidence of a provincial French style. The front portion was used for the fire department, police department, jail, and city council room on the second floor. In the basement were horse stalls that housed horses used to pull the fire wagons. The back portion was the opera house, of which the interior was large and held a seating capacity of 1,000; however, only 600 seats were installed at first, due to a lack of funding. The auditorium was lit with a large prismatic reflector with 60 gas burners. This chandelier was suspended from the ceiling high above the auditorium. The stage, which was located at the south end, was 20 feet deep and 62 feet wide with a proscenium opening of approximately 36 feet square. The front curtain was flown in the fly gallery, which was unusual at the time, since most opera houses at that time were still employing the roller system.

In the summer of 1890, the opera house was remodeled. The seats were raised to an angle which would improve visibility and a window was changed to a door on the south side of the building in order to provide more uniform heating. Finally, electricity was hooked up to the building and electric lights were installed and the ceiling and walls were painted and papered.

The next alteration that occurred to the opera house was a fire of catastrophic proportions that occurred on January 14, 1898. The fire assumedly started over the stage and scenery area, and spread quickly to the roof. The building was a completely loss with only the front wall standing. Portions of the east, west, and south walls had fallen to the ground and all the interior destroyed. However, immediate plans were made to rebuild the structure using as much of the foundation and front wall as possible.

J.C. Holland, an architect from Topeka, was employed to draw up plans and write the specifications for the renovation. Within 8 months, the opera house was completely rebuilt and in operation. The front one-third of the new building was built of red brick, utilizing the original front wall and the back portion was built with native Geary county limestone. The clock tower on the front was supplied with a new clock and the bell was replaced with a 2,500 pound bell from the Meneely Bell Company of Troy, New York. The interior of the front portion remained in use by the fire department, the police court

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and jail on the first floor and the city council room and the board of education office on the second.

The back portion of the renovated building was again the opera house. In the renovated opera house, attendees no longer had to climb stairs when entering because the ticket office was near the door on the ground floor, which was a change from the original building. Seating capacity was estimated at 800 with the lower level of the auditorium holding 410, the balcony and gallery each held seating for 170 each. Modern opera chairs were used throughout the balcony, dress circle, & parquet.

The interior of the opera house was described as beautiful as the walls were frescoed and painted in shades of terra cotta and gold along with plastic relief decorations. At the front of the auditorium, near the stage, six private boxes, three on the east and three on the west, were built and decorated with willow chairs, expensive silk, wool drapery and carpet. In addition, opposite the box in the balcony on either side was located a spacious loggia. The stage remained at the south end of the auditorium; however, the size was enlarged to 36 feet deep by 62 feet wide by 48 feet high. The new proscenium opening was 25 feet high by 30 feet wide. The proscenium curtain was hand painted by Wm. Grabach of Omaha, Nebraska, who also painted the original 150 pieces of stock scenery. To the east and west of the stage were built ten dressing rooms with wash bowls and city water along with a lady's toilet. In addition, a dressing room was built for the chorus under the stage in the basement.

In 1919, the Junction City Opera House was remodeled and renamed the City Theater. Unfortunately, sources do not give details of the extent of the remodel.

In 1937, the City built a municipal building on the northwest corner of the same intersection and sold the opera house to White Brothers Construction Company. In 1942, the building was reopened to the public as the Colonial Theater, owned by Dickinson Theaters. The interior of the building from the north end back to the stage was nearly completely gutted. The stage was filled with air-conditioning units and a backdrop was built as a projector screen. A new balcony was built stretching from the east side to the west side of the building and the opera chairs were removed and replaced by cinema theater seats. The exterior also underwent massive changes. All of the upper story windows were blocked in with either brick or limestone, and all of the first story windows were blocked. In addition, the main entrance to the opera house portion of the building along Jefferson Street was blocked. Finally, the front portion of the building that has remained red brick had been painted white.

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The only portion of the building that appears to be in the 1937 condition is the basement under the city hall portion are the remains of sleeping quarters and horse stalls. Finally, the northern elevation was changed to typical modern theatre look, complete with a metal awning with a variable message sign board and advertisement display windows. This included siding over the original opening for the fire engine. Commonwealth Theatres owned and operated the facility until they sold it in 1982 to a Junction City couple, Fred & Dorothy Bramlage, who immediately donated it back to the City of Junction City with the hopes they would renovate the building and use it for a convention center and a home for the Junction City Little Theater group.

From 1982 until the present day, the opera house has never been used. However, a local group has spent considerable time and effort in attempting to restoring the building. Some of their efforts, with the help of the City include a new asphalt shingle roof and guttering system, removing the Colonial awning and sign board, restoring all of the original windows in the front brick portion of the building, removing all siding that covered the fire engine door and cleaning off all the white paint from the red brick.. The restoration work that has been completed has been all exterior work. The City of Junction City is now seeking to secure funds to continue and complete a rehabilitation project that would restore many of the original features, including office space in the front portion and an auditorium and functional stage, including the private boxes for the back portion of the building.

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The Junction City Opera House (c. 1898) or City Hall, as it was originally referred to after its opening in January 1882, was one of the most centrally located opera houses in Kansas and the Midwest. It was a primary stop-off for traveling stage companies on their way between Kansas City and Denver. After its burning and reconstruction in 1898, the Junction City Opera House was known to be one of the best in the state save a more expensively constructed one in Ottawa, Kansas. Its local importance lies with the initiative of local citizens to construct a hall that would allow access to cultural events previously only rarely encountered: Broadway shows, concerts, operettas, lecture courses, etc.-- as well as provide a forum for local entertainment. Its national significance is as a type of the small town theatre whose existence supported the growth and development of the American Theatre during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The hall is historically significant in the area of Entertainment/Recreation as one of the best examples of the small town opera house which had a significant role in the history of the American Theatre.

The Junction City Opera House was inspired in 1880 by an outing of Junction Citians to the Bonebrakes Opera House in Abilene, Kansas, some thirty miles away. Junction City was one of the few larger cities in Kansas without such an entertainment hall in the 1880s. In an effort to convince the public and fund the initiative for the construction of an opera house, the proposed hall was designed with a dual purpose as City Hall/Opera House. When a vote was put to the people, the proposition was passed 214 for and 86 against the \$12,000 bonds for the project.

By the time the hall was completed and opened for performances in January 1882, it was said to be one of the most beautiful between the Mississippi and the Rock Mountains. Eventually, it was to become the favored stop-off for road shows between Kansas City and Denver. In January 1898, when a fire burned the entire hall to the ground save the front wall of the building, the Junction City community again showed its strong support for the opera house by re-financing and re-building an even more impressive entertainment hall. From 1882-1915, the Opera House served Junction City and the surrounding communities the finest fare of Eastern culture and entertainment as well as serving as a center for local social functions and talent.

With the advent of the motion picture industry, road companies became more scarce and the opera house's position of importance in the community as an entertainment center greatly declined. In 1915, new management opened the opera house facilities with plans of running movies toward the end of the week if no large road shows were available. Finally, in 1937, with the WPA's construction of a new city hall for city offices, the Opera House was given to the White Brothers Construction Company as payment for their work on the new city building.

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From its beginning in 1882, until motion pictures began to dominate the entertainment scene early in the twentieth century, the Junction City Opera House was instrumental in bringing to Junction City and the surrounding communities the culture and entertainment of the Eastern cities via dramatical stage productions, operettas, traveling Broadway shows, and concerts from famous musicians, bands, and orchestras. The Junction City Opera House was among the few opera houses in Kansas equipped with a stage theatre that could handle a big time production. Some of the better known dramatical productions of the late 1800's include "Below Zero," by Rentfrow's Jolly Pathfinders; "Faust," by the Lewis Morrision Company; "Monte Cristo," the W. Montoe Company; and "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the Salter and Martin Company. Smaller towns relied on traveling stock companies that played the local town hall. Theatre shows ran primarily through the August-May season due to lack of adequate ventilation in the summer months and the fact that Junction City was a rural community with farmers being kept especially busy during the summer. Although Junction City was predominately rural, the location of Fort Riley a few miles to the north of the city was an advantage to the opera house in providing an eager and sufficiently prosperous audience to support more of the larger traveling companies and productions.

However, it was the initiative and industry of the local citizens in their desire for cultural entertainment that made the opera house a reality. For a predominately rural community, this represented their vision and ambition in supporting a hall that would bring home the entertainment and culture of the big city, a far cry from the church and school-centered activities that had previously dominated their world. In addition to theatre shows and various traveling entertainment, the opera house was the site for other society events such as lecture courses, conventions, political campaign speeches, high school graduation exercises, as well as large banquets such as the one held in honor of the 20th Kansas Regiment when it returned from the Spanish-American war. Conveniently, with the development of more modern farm machinery and with the opera house's season running from August to May, the local citizenry also had the leisure time to support and enjoy the new entertainment.

When the building burned down in 1898, local businessmen from businesses on Seventh Street near the opera house were quick to donate \$700 to hasten the reconstruction, this in addition to the \$10,000 recovered from insurance. The city council lost no time in securing bids for work on the new building, which proved to be even better equipped for large stage productions. Also, it again provided space for city offices. The front portion of the new building, which was the only salvageable portion, continued to be constructed of brick with the fire department, police court, and jail on the first floor and the city council room and board of education office on the second floor.

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Remains of the prison cells and stalls for holding the fire horses can still be seen in the basement of the building. The back portion, which houses the opera house, was constructed of native stone. Since some recent renovation work, the exterior looks much the same today save the absence of the covered entrance for stage coaches. The interior seated 820 people with a balcony, dress circle and parquet furnished with opera chairs and six private boxes furnished with willow chairs, drapes, and carpeting. The walls were painted and frescoed in shades of terra cotta and gold with plastic relief furnishing throughout.

The stage floor now had an area of 2000 square feet, an increase of some 700 square feet, with a proscenium opening twenty-five feet high by thirty feet wide. The front curtain and stage scenery of 150 pieces were elegantly hand-painted. The fly gallery raised the scenery well out of sight, and a light board was installed with electric lights to illuminate the stage. The newly constructed city hall/opera house was one of the finest in the state and became the top-ranking theater for stock companies traveling between Kansas City and Denver. Virtually every operetta, drama and concert stopped there for at least a night, including nationally known figures such as John Philip Sousa, who performed at the Junction City Opera House in 1902.

In 1904, the city council found the fire department facilities to be less than adequate, and had them remodeled. The doorway was widened, the horses' stalls were rebuilt and wainscoted. The floor of the entire facility was sloped towards a drain to boost the level of sanitation. An upstairs sleeping room was provided for the firemen, from which they could quickly access the wagon below via a fireman's pole. The remodel also included installation of an alarm system made up of a night gong in the sleeping quarters and an electric gong outside. In the case of a fire, citizens of Junction City were instructed to call the telephone operator and inform her of the address of the blaze. In the daytime, the operator would then telephone the fire station while at the same time activating the outdoor gong. At night, the operator would sound the gong in the firemen's sleeping quarters.

In 1915, the Opera House came under the management of John W. Wendel, a former road thespian himself, who promised to offer the best in vaudeville and motion pictures; he had contracted to be the exclusive purveyor of Paramount pictures in Junction City. He opened his tenure as the Opera House's manager with "The Mary Pickford Road Show," a trilogy of films featuring the era's most popular actress.

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In 1919, the Junction City Opera House was remodeled and renamed the City Theater. Unfortunately, sources do not give details of the extent of the remodel. Throughout this period, the opera house remained a venue not only for professional theater troupes and Hollywood's motion pictures, but also for local productions. The Opera House was often used by local organizations for staging entertainments which served as fundraisers for various causes. For instance, the Junction City Business Girls Club presented two plays to establish a YWCA, and an entertainment was offered to raise money for a new school for the children of St. Xavier's parish.

In the mid 1930s, the city commission began considering how it could best take advantage of the WPA's public works program. The public works program promised thirty percent of the funding for a community building project plus a 3 ½ % interest rate on twenty-year bonds voted by the community, school district, or county undertaking the project. Such an opportunity was a boon to cash-strapped Depression-era communities. The city commission hired architect Charles W. Shaver in 1935 to draw up plans for remodeling the Opera House to better serve the community as the city hall, fire department, police station, and auditorium. Ultimately, however, the commission decided that constructing a new building to encompass these functions would be more beneficial for Junction City. The new municipal building was completed in 1937, and the Opera House was sold to the White Brothers Construction Company.

Under the ownership of the White Brothers Construction Company, the Junction City Opera House served a variety of functions. The front part of the building was used to store lumber during the building boom at nearby Fort Riley. Members of the city's semi-professional baseball team used the firemen's sleeping quarters as a dormitory. A portion of the building became a fruit and vegetable market. In 1942, the Opera House was purchased and reopened by the Dickinson chain of theaters as the Colonial Theater. To accommodate the expectations of the modern theater-going public, a theater marquee was added, the building's red brick facade was painted white, and the interior was gutted to make way for the equipment—such as an air conditioner—expected in an up-to-date movie theater.

In the early 1950s, the Commonwealth theater chain purchased the Opera House and continued to operate it as the Colonial Theater. The building was operated as a movie theater until 1982, when it was sold to Fred and Dorothy Bramlage. The couple then donated the Opera House to the City of Junction City for use as a convention center. However, the cost of renovating the building was prohibitive, and it sat unused for several years. In 1986, the citizens of Junction City voted against a bond issue which would have funded the building's renovation. More recently, however, as part of a general effort to revitalize Junction City's downtown, a group of

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concerned citizens has organized to raise funds for the repair and renovation of the Opera House as a convention center and home for the Junction City Little Theater. They have so far managed to stabilize the exterior, and are currently seeking funding for the refurbishment of the interior.

The Junction City Opera House was a credit to the initiative and vision of the people of Junction City and is now a symbol of a bygone era. With the addition of moving pictures to Junction City's choice of entertainment, having the advantage of being easier on the pocketbook and more versatile in selection of features, the opera house began to lose its distinction as the entertainment center for the community. Moreover, as the same occurred across the nation, traveling shows became more scarce and difficult to obtain. Eventually, the building was sold to Colonial Theatre and the interior gutted. While little of its interior's former grandeur remains, the building still stands proudly on the corner of Seventh and Jefferson with its clock and high bell tower, reflecting the glamour of an otherwise forgotten page in the history of the American Theatre.

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Bibliography

Johnson, Marvin. "A History of the Junction City Opera House in Junction City Kansas: 1880 – 1919." August 1970.

Junction City Daily Union.

Junction City Republican.

Junction City Telephone Company Directories.

Interview with Mr. Fred Durand, July 14, 1970.

The Opera House Oracle, Vol. 1, No. 1.

Geographical Data : Acreage of Property: less than one acre

UTM References

1.	Zone	Easting	Northing
	1501 KS North	1644364.9493	255501.5185 (Kansas State Plane
	Coordinates)		
	Latitude	Longitude	
	39 01 44.31595	96 49 52.22722	

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is located on the west 70 ft of Lots 8, 9, and 10, Block 28, Junction City, Geary County, Kansas. The property is bound on the West by Jefferson Street, to the South by an alley, to the North by Seventh Street, and to the East by adjacent property lines.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire parcel that is historically associated with the property.

Form Prepared By

name/title	Greg L. Adams, Assistant City Engineer	date	February 5, 2003
organization	City of Junction City, Kansas	telephone	785-238-3103
street & number	700 N. Jefferson		
ext. 503			
city or town	Junction City	state	Kansas
code	66441	zip	